

Telephone interview with HMCS Edward M. Toland, USN (Ret.), former hospital corpsman with duty in Vietnam, assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 4th Marines. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 21 January 2005.

Where are you from originally?

I was born in Exeter, New Hampshire but grew up in Weston, Mass, just outside of Waltham. When I retired in '74, I was stationed at the Naval Hospital in Chelsea, and in '72 I had my house built here in Reading.

Where did you go to high school?

At Weston High.

How did you decide you wanted to join the Navy?

I joined the National Guard when I was in High School. I was 18 at the time. I spent a few years in the Guard and, after I graduated high school, I went to Northeastern for a semester. Back then we didn't have student loans and all of the other financial assistance they have today so I was trying to work and go to school at the same time. In fact, I worked at the Business School at Harvard in the library.

So I decided to go in the service and get the GI Bill and subsequently go back to college. Actually, I ended up staying in and making a career out of it.

But you said you were in the Guard first. How did you make the transition over to the Navy?

I got sick of lugging a BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle] around, being wet all the time, digging holes in the ground, and living in pup tents. These were a number of things I ended up doing anyway with the Marines. I thought I was going to get a warm bunk, a steel deck over my head, and three regular meals a day going in the Navy, and then getting the GI Bill and furthering my education.

When did you join?

It was the latter part of 1950.

Did you go to boot camp at Great Lakes?

Yes, I went to the Lakes. Then my first duty station was Naval Hospital Chelsea right near home.

Were you a ward corpsman there?

Yes. In fact I worked on the neurosurgical ward.

Had you gone to corps school prior to that?

Oh, yes. I went from boot camp right over to corps school. When I had my interview at boot camp, I had three choices of what I could get into. At one time, I had worked construction so I put down Seabees. My second choice was bosun's mate. The guy who was interviewing me realized that I had taken a couple of years of typing. And with my brief college experience, he talked me into putting down Hospital Corps as my third choice. Of course, during the Korean War, that's what they needed very desperately. So I ended up going to corps school right from boot camp.

But you didn't end up in Korea afterward. You went to Chelsea.

Out of class A school, you usually go to a naval hospital as a first assignment. That's how I ended up at Chelsea. I was in the personnel office one day. The personnel officer was a guy named [Truman] Keck, who had been a prisoner of war during World War II. He stepped out of his office and said to me, "I gotta send somebody down to the torpedo station in Newport, Rhode Island. Are you interested?"

I said, yes. At that time, we were on port and starboard and working special watches. There were some long days. And every other day, we'd put in a long day and then have to spend 3 hours on special watch. Back then, they didn't have the critical or intensive care units that they set up later for critically injured patients. They usually had rooms off the wards where they had critical patients and you would be assigned for a 3-hour watch so they could get constant medical attention.

So I volunteered to go to the torpedo station in Newport. After a few months there, I got my orders to the Fleet Marine Force. I went to the Marine Air Wing at Cherry Point.

So you didn't go to Field Medical Service School, then?

No. I don't think they had restarted Field Med School at that time. A lot of corpsmen initially went right to the FMF without any Field Med School.

At that point, you suddenly realized that you were not going to get the warm bunk on a ship. Suddenly, everything turned green on you.

[Laughter.] Yes it did. A lot of people don't realize that you had to keep up two sea bags during that time. If you were a corpsman, you usually had two sea bags sitting around somewhere, one with Navy gear and the other with Marine Corps gear.

So you reported to a Marine air wing as your first assignment.

That's correct.

And what did you do there?

They assigned me to sick call originally, and then I ended up in labor and delivery.

How long were you at Cherry Point?

Probably 4 or 5 months at the most. When they re-formed the 3rd Marine Air Wing they transferred a lot of corpsmen from Cherry Point to Opa Locka, outside north Miami.

This would have been in the early '50s.

Yes, '51 and '52.

Of course, it was much later in your career that you ended up going to Vietnam. How did that happen?

I ended up making a career out of the Navy. I liked the challenge of what I was doing. Eventually, I ended up being assigned to the 3rd Marine Division and ended up in Japan with an artillery outfit.

After my tour there I had a tour at Parris Island for 3 years. Subsequently, I went to Camp Lejeune for another 3 years. After going through Medical Administration School at Portsmouth, Virginia, I went to the Naval Hospital at Portsmouth, New Hampshire and from there I went to Nam in '65.

Were you assigned to the Portsmouth Navy Yard?

No. I was at the Naval Hospital. I worked Food Service for 3 years up there and then they made me the Chief Master at Arms for about a year before I went to Vietnam. I got my orders in July and I ended up in Nam in August.

That was '65?

Yes.

Things were just starting to get hot over there at that time. Do you recall what your thoughts were when you got those orders?

Yes. Earlier, around the spring of the year, some of the corpsmen had been TADd to the groups that went to Vietnam early on. Some of the people who were at Kaneohe Bay went in-country around May or June of '65. The medical personnel who TADd were replaced by the ones who were transferred there later on. After about 3 or 4 months, they returned to their regular duty stations. Because they hadn't spent a whole tour over there, they were eligible to return to Vietnam later on.

I went out of Travis and we landed at Wake Island and refueled. We then went to Okinawa where I spent a week or so. We then went to Vietnam. They had just kicked off [Operation] Starlight, which was the first Marine operation, and we arrived in Danang while the operation was going on.

Personnel from the Division Surgeon's office were sitting on jeeps at the air station there with our orders all ready. All we did was get off the C-130 and jump on a chopper that was going down to Chu Lai. I had orders to 2/4. There were seven or eight other corpsmen besides myself.

This was the 3rd Marine Division. And you were already assigned to a unit.

Yes. They were already waiting for us. We knew something was going on. When we arrived at Chu Lai, they had trucks already waiting for us to bring us out to the units. Some of the others were going 3/3, some to 1/7.

When I got to my position on the other side of Route 1, a first class named Ruffle was actually the senior person at the time because their chief was hospitalized at B-Med. Ruffle met me at the gate and said, "Just drop your gear and grab your 782 gear and weapon." I went up to the armorer's tent and got my gear and finally went to where the BAS was set up.

The standard weapon at that time would have been an M14.

Yes. But as a corpsman, I had a .45. Later on, I had my corpsmen carry M14s just to disguise them as being other than corpsmen so they'd blend in. This was after we had experience with VC snipers who would aim at those who looked different and stood out.

What was your rank at this time?

I was a chief. I had put on my chief's hat when I was at the Naval Hospital in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

So once you had your 782 gear and were armed, where did you go?

I was introduced to the battalion surgeons--the two doctors we had. About the time I got settled in, the outfit started coming back from Starlight. In fact, my first official act was to sit in on a critique they had after the operation.

Do you recall any of that?

Yes. Bull Fisher was the CO and our executive officer was a guy by the name of DeFazio. These people were quite well known in the Corps at that time. In fact, I think both of them had been on the Canal [Guadalcanal] during World War II. I know that DeFazio had been at Iwo Jima. When

I arrived, we had three or four people who dated back to the Guadalcanal operations. There were a lot of World War II and Korean War vets in the outfit.

As the chief, what were your responsibilities?

I had charge of the corpsmen and made assignments for them. I made sure the shots were given, sanitation was upheld, paperwork was done on timely basis, etc.

So you were in a headquarters area?

Yes. I was the administrative assistant to the battalion surgeon.

It must have been a heck of responsibility to have to assign corpsmen to the field.

Yes. That was really a load, to be honest, especially when we started getting corpsmen killed. We lost one corpsmen during Starlight. I didn't know him because I arrived afterward. We had a few get killed during the time I was there. I recall an incident [16 Nov. 1965] when a corpsman named [Ronald R.] Hornbrook dug into a bouncing betty when Hotel Company moved into a hill position and they were digging in for the night. It killed him and took down about 17 or 18 other people. My senior corpsman was standing sideways to the blast and he got some serious wounds. His name is Crider. He's out in Kansas City working for the VFW now.

Did you ever go out in the field yourself?

Oh yes. I went out on a few occasions. I went out during the first phase of Double Eagle. I had a number of reasons for going out. One was to get a feel for what was going on. Also to convey to everyone the fact that I was willing to do what I was assigning other people to do. One of the first individuals killed on this op was one of our corpsmen, [HN William R.] Glueckstein. During March of that year, we had two major operations--Utah and Texas. LTCOL P.X. Kelley called me over to his tent to talk with me. He wanted me to assign some corpsmen to go out with 2/5's Hotel Company group with about 45 officers and NCOs. It was Easter Sunday of '66. Because I had a lot of my people involved in those two operations, I told him that I'd take it myself.

I think 2/5 had sent their officers and staff NCOs in a week before they were supposed to relieve us. They wanted Hotel Company to familiarize themselves with the TAOR [tactical area of responsibility] they were going to be responsible for. I went back to my tent to get my Unit 1, get my gear, and make sure my weapon was functioning. A first class named Scholties asked me what I was doing. I told him so he volunteered to go with me. Then Ruffle said he would go along, too. So I went out with two first classes.

Do you remember that operation you went on?

Oh, yes. We got ambushed twice. We went back to a hill complex named 72. I think it was 272 meters high. There was a platoon sitting up there. Within half an hour after going by there we went down into a draw, across some rice paddies, and into a small village. We were ambushed there.

After going through the village and coming back, they fired about three RPGs at us from another hill.

Were there any casualties?

We had some minor casualties the second time. They were firing down on us. We returned fire in a second or less, which forced the enemy to fire high. I was near the end of 2/5's group. A little bit behind me was an artillery FO [forward observer] who initially was trying to get some support fire for us. At that time you had to clear support fire with the local commander in that area.

That was a point of anguish for many people. But we got out of that ambush with our own return fire. We were under fire for about 5 minutes at the most.

It wasn't uncommon to take fire. Sometimes you'd be running down the road and someone would be firing at you. Occasionally, we went on MEDCAPs. When we were in the Chu Lai area, we used to park our vehicles in Ahn Tahn. We'd have about three or four Marines with us but we left them with the vehicle. If you didn't guard the vehicle, the locals would swipe everything off it. The five or six corpsmen we had would walk maybe 6 or 7 miles to these villages.

A village at that time might have three or four huts here. And then a quarter of a mile away would be three or four huts. And they called it all one village, even though the huts and rice paddies were very spread out. We'd MEDCAP that area and when we were through for the day, we'd come back in, get into the vehicles, and go back to our regular position.

Many times the VC, we suspected, used the MEDCAPs for treating their own people. People came in with bullet wounds and some shrapnel. We'd just go ahead and treat them and not make a big deal out of it. And they pretty much let us come and go. It's hard to imagine they would let us do that but as long as we would act stupid and treat everybody that came in, they left us alone. One day, we did get some fire from across the river on our way back from a MEDCAP. When this incident happened, we had a denatl officer from a Seabee outfit and his tech who volunteered to go out with us.

The first class I mentioned earlier--Ruffle--was the one who pretty much took an interest and did most of the MEDCAPing. I'd go out maybe once a week with him when things were quiet.

How many folks would be on one of these MEDCAPs?

Usually about a half a dozen of us corpsmen plus about four Marines.

Do you remember any other episodes while you were in Vietnam that might be worthy of note?

I had an outstanding group of corpsmen. I had very, very few problems. We worked on the basis that if a person wasn't going to be able to adjust to that type of situation with the stress, etc., that it was meaningless to keep them around. Unlike the Hollywood versions when somebody is unable to do a task, we didn't make a big deal about it. The Marines have the same philosophy. If somebody can't do it, we accept the fact that there are certain people who can't withstand that stressful situation. And that only happened twice. I think I had to send a couple of corpsmen back to Danang.

I had one corpsman early on who had a nervous breakdown out on a night ambush. When we were in Chu Lai we used to put out these night ambushes. They'd have about three or four Marines. They'd move them out in certain areas and usually they'd take a corpsman with them. One of the corpsmen had already been put in for a Bronze Star but that night he had a complete breakdown. Of course, that blew the whole ambush. We finally got him in the next morning and sent him to B-Med, one of the ones we had to lose because of stress.

We moved out of Chu Lai up to the Marble Mountain area for a couple of months. While we were there, we got strafed by some ADs that were flown by Ky's pilots. We also got mortared. There was a Buddhist riot that was going on at that time. A local commander in Danang had revolted against Ky's government and they sent up troops. We had taken over an ammo dump on the east side of Danang, displacing the local ARVN.

Then we moved up to Hue-Phu Bai and did a rough rider convoy up there. We used to call them rough rider convoys. When you went on the road during the day, they'd move the whole outfit by truck. They usually had a couple of Hueys flying overhead going along with us. We always had a gasoline truck with us to refuel. That's what the enemy would usually go for. They would usually set off a mine electrically.

During the Hastings operation we took a rough rider convoy up to Dong Ha, Cam Lo, and the Rockpile right up on the DMZ. These incidents were constant and recurring.

I've spoken to a lot of corpsmen who were over there and most of them have told me that no one ever really knew what was going on. In every sense it was a "frontless" war.

You could be coming back from B-Med with supplies and somebody would snipe at you. There was always a constant possibility that something would happen at any time. You were on guard constantly the whole time you were over there.

And that made the whole thing so stressful. There was really no rear area where you could be comfortable. You could be shelled or mortared while you were sleeping.

Oh, sure. And on top of that we had one incident where one of the artillery shells had a premature burst right over our position. In fact, we almost lost our chaplain. When that thing went off, it must have been about 9 or 10 at night. It put holes all through our tentage. A piece of metal about as big as my hand knocked the end of his cot right off. Chaplain John Glynn retired as a captain, CHC, and passed away last fall.

We had a sergeant who got killed by his own men. He was checking his outpost and threw a helmet at a guy who was sleeping and the guy reacted by cranking off a round. This incident happened early on. Those things happen. You get incidents like that in a war zone that are pretty routine. It's been going on in all wars.

You had talked earlier about your Unit 1. What was in the Unit 1 at that time?

A lot of battle dressings. At that time, we used to carry about 20 morphine syrettes. I used to make my corpsmen carry a lot of hemostats--at least 20 of them. You can clamp off a lot of things with those. If you're under stress and have to do things in a hurry, they're handy to clamp off bleeders, etc. Of course we had the old adhesive tape, safety pins. We carried small splints, scissors.

Did you have a little surgical kit in there?

Oh, yes. We didn't have infusion sets and all that stuff we have today. If you started an IV, you almost had to cast that needle into the vein to keep it from coming out when you moved the guy around. We used some pretty primitive techniques compared to the equipment they have to work with today.

You didn't carry around serum albumin or plasma, did you?

Yes. We carried about three or four cans around or as many as we could carry.

Did you use it very often?

Oh, yes, quite often. We also used a lot of morphine. Sometimes you want to work on somebody that's in a lot of pain and you don't want to get in a wrestling match so you hit him with morphine and that will allow you to do a lot of things you couldn't do.

Did you then mark the patient to indicate he had gotten the morphine?

Yes. We marked the tags and forehead. That was one of my early problems--getting people to make sure they marked things down. I got pretty good results after I chewed out a few people that were a little sloppy. We got pretty good at making sure that people indicated what they had done before we got the guy back to the rear. When we started out over there they had the concept of the BAS being split. You'd send out a forward BAS, then you'd follow up with the rest of the BAS. We didn't operate that way. A lot of times you'd throw a guy on a chopper out in the field and he'd end up straight at B-Med or sometimes right to a hospital ship or LPH with an OR open. The BAS didn't

really function that much as an evacuation station. You didn't stabilize many people because what you were doing was sending people right from where they were picked up to A-Med or B-Med, or out to the *Repose*. We pretty much bypassed the BAS. The only time we used the battalion aid station was when you had a major operation and Delta Med set up. You'd send your corpsmen up to Delta Med. The battalion corpsmen were all set up right with the collecting and clearing station. Delta Med at that time was not set up permanently. They just used the Delta Med personnel whenever they had an operation, usually corpsmen from C-Med and BAS's of battalions in the operation.

How long were in Vietnam?

I was there a little over 13 months. We started out with about 57 corpsmen, which was the TO [table of organization], and by the time I was over there 6 months I was lucky to have 35 corpsmen total. I always kept at least several in each company--four companies (7 per company, 2 per platoon, plus senior corpsmen). I always made sure that the companies had their full TO. Actually they were supposed to have eight but when I got short handed, I still made sure I kept at least 7 corpsmen with each company.

How did you get to know General Weise?

We have a 2/4 Association and I was the treasurer for about 4 years. The original treasurer was a guy named Gorsage, who was with Weise over there. He died about a year ago. I relieved him as treasurer of the 2/4 Association. I worked with Weise and a lot of the other people as well.

When did you leave Vietnam?

I left in September of '66 and ended up on independent duty on a destroyer out of Newport.

After you left Vietnam, did you give much thought as to what had been accomplished while you were there?

I think you'd get a different answer out of someone like me who was career than you would from someone who was just in for 4 years or something. Our philosophy was simple. That was our job. And I felt at the time we were over there that we were really accomplishing a lot, especially with that MEDCAP program. I thought we were doing a lot of good. The Marines were very supportive of working with the locals. I thought we had accomplished what we were there for. In retrospect, I still think so. If you talk with P.X. Kelley, he has a perspective on things that I probably hadn't thought of at the time. The way we operated over there gave the communists and the Russians some pause to reconsider whether they really wanted to get involved with us or not. Talking with the outfit I was with, they were pretty effective doing the job they were assigned to do--at high cost, of course.

You lost a good number of corpsmen while you were there.

Fortunately, most of the ones I lost were due to injuries. About the time Hornbrook dug into that bouncing betty, one of the corpsman stepped on a mine and lost part of his leg. I don't know whether I should bring this up. There's a retired Marine sergeant major who was just a sergeant at that time. I met him at the Vietnam veterans' get together in Melbourne, Florida 2 years ago. He was a sergeant in the same platoon with that corpsman who stepped on the mine and who lost part of his leg. Basically, he told me not to feel sorry for him. The guy was happy that he had lost part of a leg and would be leaving Vietnam.

The reason it's hard to bring up incidents like that is because I doubt that any two people have the same reaction to anything. We're all different and we all handle things differently. When we meet at reunions, we discuss these things and a lot of times we jog each other's memories.

When you got back, did you find it difficult readjusting to regular Navy life after having been in Vietnam?

To some degree. I had spent so much time working with Marines that when they put me on a destroyer it was very strange getting back to the Navy environment. In retrospect, I was concerned when I reported aboard but I adjusted very quickly.

How many years did you put in the Navy before you retired?

I had almost 25 years counting my 2 years of National Guard duty. I made senior chief when I was on the destroyer. Then I went on the *Cascade* (AD-16) for a couple of years. I was transferred to Chelsea from there and became the health benefits counselor for the hospital. I retired in 1974 when they closed the Naval Hospital at Chelsea.

It's been 35, almost 40 years since you were in Vietnam. Do you think about it much anymore?

I probably think about it on a daily basis. I've got a grandson who is over in Iraq. He managed to get home for the holidays. I had some conversations with him. We could talk with each other on a very familiar basis. I knew what he was talking about and he knew where I was coming from. I have a memory that is continuous to some degree but if you're talking about me dwelling on it or anything like that. No. It's just history. It's past. It was just part of my job.

Senior Chief. I want to thank you for spending time with me this afternoon. I've gotten some new insight from a chief's perspective.